

HEAR TELL:

Invisibility, Invasiveness, and the Cell Phone

BY CHELLIS GLENDINNING

from WILD MATTERS

and

in the dangerously ignorant hands
of the intellect

by Jean Liedloff

from

THE CONTINUUM CONCEPT

In Search of Lost Happiness

Alexander Graham Bell is my ancestor. My brother is named after him: Alexander Bell Glendinning. We grew up hearing about that notorious moment in invention history —

March 10, 1876 — when Bell set up his infamous gadgetry in Boston and called out via electricity to his assistant in the next room,

“Watson! Come here!”

We were then regaled with the talk of the lone inventor’s tragedy: loss of rights over his creation “for the good of humanity”— that is, to the bank accounts of the already wealthy. It’s true. Bell was corralled and quartered by zealous American entrepreneurs and never even received a free phone card for what has since become the most invisible and, at the same time, most invasive instrument introduced to modern life.

You may be surprised to hear that: the most invisible, the most invasive.

Your surprise is testimony to the degree to which this instrument, plus its massive supporting technologies, has become part of us: our bodies, our homes, our workplaces, our landscapes, our assumptions.

Comparative literature professor Avital Ronell wrote a rather astounding book on the subject called, of course, *The Telephone Book*. Touted as a political deconstruction of technology, the book penetrates our deaf acceptance of telephony, exploring and revealing three areas of concern: (1) how much the machinery defines our every thought and act; (2) how its existence furthers the schizophrenia of the mind/body and human/nature inherent to technological society; and (3) how it lays the base for the technology-constituted state. *continued on page 12*

Here's Jamie Lee Curtis

popping a discrete

wireless out of her gown

at dinner parties.

in the dangerously ignorant hands of the intellect

It was nearly finished when I noticed Tududu working on it. It had upright sticks lashed with vines to an upper and a lower square frame, like a comic-strip version of a prehistoric

playpen. It had cost a good deal of labor and Tududu looked quite pleased with himself when he lopped off the last protuberant stick end. He cast about for Cananasinyuwana, his son, who had taken his first step about a week earlier. No sooner had Tududu sighted the tot than he snatched him up and put him triumphantly in the new invention. Cananasinyuwana stood uncomprehending for a few seconds at the center, then made a move to one side, turned about, and realized that he was trapped. In an instant he was screaming a message of utter horror, a sound rarely heard from children of his society. It was unequivocal. The playpen was wrong, unsuitable for human babies. Tududu’s continuum sense, as strong as any Yequana’s, did not hesitate in interpreting the shrieks of his son. He pulled him out and let him run away to find his mother, who comforted him for the minutes he needed to counteract the shock before he was ready to go out again to play. Tududu accepted the failure of his experiment without question; after a moment’s last look at his handiwork, he smashed the playpen to bits with an ax, and as the wood he had used was green, he did not gain so much as a pile of firewood from his morning’s efforts. I have no doubt that it was neither the first nor the last such invention by a Yequana, but their continuum sense would never permit so patent an error to last long. If our continuum sense had not been so elemental a force unto human behavior for our two million years of stability, it would not have been able to contain the dangers inherent in our highly developed intellect. That it has lately been disempowered to the point where instability, or “progress,” appears to us to be our ever more glorious destiny does not alter one jot the fact that the continuum sense is intrinsic to our very humanness. Tududu smashing the playpen is what we are evolved to be; what we would have continued to be had our sense remained unclouded, unbetrayed by whatever derailed it, leaving us so much in the dangerously ignorant hands of the intellect.

HEAR TELL:

continued from page 1

Lending our ears to the rock anthem "Meet the New Boss, Same As the Old Boss," we are reminded that what has been invisible and invasive in the past only becomes more invisible and more invasive in the present. Amid a fanfare of glamour and fantasy, enter: the new telephone, or better put, the digital wireless phone-pilot. In other words, telecommunications with all its satellites, microwave antennas, dishes, and towers and their electromagnetic missions; its supercomputers; its machinery of propaganda; its pyramid of CEOs, scientists, engineers, technicians, marketers, sales people, producers, directors, actors, artists, film crew, chemical clean-up crew, secretaries, and janitors; and its cricket-chirping cell phone. To understand this "new boss," we might ask the same questions Ronell asked about the "old."

How does the new wireless technology define our every thought and act?

For survival, the human psyche is built to mirror its environs. We are made to think and act in harmony with what surrounds us, and for 99 percent of our evolution, what surrounds us has been wilderness and its human component, nature-based community. We see this mirroring in the fluid, non-ego-based personality of indigenous peoples and their worldviews, which gives shape to human possibility in terms of nature's unfolding. We find a parallel mirroring in the technological world. Mental disorders ranging from dissociation, anxiety, and narcissism to posttraumatic stress, schizophrenia, and multiple personalities provide disturbing reflections of an environment erected beyond the realm of human scale and ecological sustainability—the fragmented world of cyber-mechanization.

The reflection is everywhere. Here's Jamie Lee Curtis popping a discreet wireless out of her gown at dinner parties. Her action encourages you to believe that at any time you can hook up with anyone, and have a presence anywhere. And indeed you can. Kind of. At least you can make a stock trade at Merrill Lynch headquarters in New York from a rainforest in Brazil. The promise of such seemingly limitless possibility, against the profound fragmentation that permeates our every thought and act in techno-corporate society, is seductive indeed.

This new experience of non-visual, non-sensual, and non-located relationships leads us to a heightened state of disembodiment.

The pain that lies behind the seduction drives deep into our shared unconscious. In its place denial or, if you will, deafness appears. There is deafness to the very connection and rootedness our psyches, and our ecologies, expect. There is deafness to the lack of connection and rootedness we endure. There is deafness to the rampant social and psychological problems that result.

And there is deafness to the biological effects of the technology. The truth is earsplitting. You and I, along with all the other living beings on the planet, now exist within a planetary microwave oven. It turns out that the non-ionizing radiation emitted to produce wireless telecommunications causes far more bioreaction

in living beings than, say, television waves or household electrical wires do. Studies published by government, corporate, military, and independent researchers link an array of illnesses with the electromagnetic frequencies that emanate from both handsets and towers: immunological deficiencies, brain tumors, cancers, high blood pressure, deterioration of the blood-brain barrier that protects the body from bacteria and viruses, leukemia, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's, sleep disturbances, fatigue, miscarriage, infertility, and, curiously, deafness. Research also shows illness, infertility, and death among farm animals, wildlife, and plants living near microwave towers.

Acceptance of such an outrageous predicament comes down to banality: if you use a cell phone, you think it's normal; if you think it's normal, you use it. Our every thought and act are then denied by the mundanity of wireless telephony — while its inherent alienation, dreams of grandiosity, and biological effects are refused. Instead of listening for the sources of this tragedy, we fashion our dreams from the images on TV and revel in a corporate culture loud with a violence that mirrors the apocalyptic terror we harbor deep down. Our everywhere-nowhere telephones not only symbolize our disconnection. By their existence, they add to the possibility of our extinction.

How do wireless communications further the mind/body, human/nature split?

If we approach this question with anything close to the phenomenological sharpness Avital Ronell brings to her analysis of the prewireless telephone, we will note the cell phone amplifies the fragmentation of consciousness created by the disembodied voice on the old black box. We no longer have conversations with phantom voices merely in the TV room or at the office. This new experience of nonvisual, nonsensual, and nonlocated relationships leads us to a heightened state of disembodiment. And a crucial question emerges: What is this condition of chronic dissociation preparing us for?

I got an earful on the subject during a Public Radio International interview I shared with Marvin Minsky, MIT's inventor of artificial intelligence. As he was expounding on the social benefits of computers, Minsky informed me — with pride and certainty — that the final disconnect will be the removal of all life from Earth and replacement of sentient beings by "thinking" machines, genetically engineered life forms, and nanotechnology.

Minsky is himself a fine example of mind/body dissociation, and his vision for the future mirrors the separation of human from nature foisted upon us by technological society. Flying down ten-lane freeways in our computer-guided conveyances, plugged into devices spouting disembodied voices, asking handheld pilots how the weather is may feel like power. But by doing this, Minsky seems to have dialed a schizoid area code concerning what life on this planet could be.

Doing it, you and I may hardly notice that the terrain on the side of the freeway is torn to unrecognizable shreds by earthmovers to provide the metals that construct the cell phone. Flying down the highway, with our minds so removed from earthly knowledge and our lives so disconnected from the natural world, we may not notice that the sky itself is splintered by microwave towers spewing non-ionizing radiation right in to our bones.

How does the telecommunications industry feed the postmodern political process?

To answer this question, it is essential to realize that the words we have been taught for describing contemporary political and economic forms prevent us from perceiving their nature. After World War II, when hundreds of decolonization movements challenged the most predominant political form of the time, it became awkward to continue using the words, which described it: the language of imperialism. Sociology stepped in, and we got terms like mass society and developed world. But such terms speak only of bigness and complexity, conveniently skipping over the power relations inherent to both yesterday's classical imperialism and today's newer form of global hegemony, the corporate economy.

In describing our world, let us reclaim words of political power and add to them the language of technological development. Ronell does. Drawing links between politics and technology, she pins the success of that renowned fascist state, Nazi Germany, on the telephone. In the Third Reich, the telephone was not a neutral device safely functioning in a context of relativity. Its purpose was the centralization of power, and in service to this goal, it became a weapon, a means of state surveillance, "an open accomplice to lies" clinching the totalitarian control sought by the regime.

Others have echoed the relationship between technology and political expansionism. In *The Tools of Empire*, social scientist Daniel Headrick traces the give-and-take between nineteenth century European land accumulation and technologies such as iron boats, guns, underwater cables, and railroads. In his most recent work, *The Fire of His Genius*, historian Kirkpatrick Sale shows how the steamboat brought the industrial revolution to the United States, opened up the continent's interior to settlement, and facilitated the aggression against indigenous peoples that was necessary for complete takeover.

Telecommunications is likewise a technology that serves the encroachment of a political and economic system. Today's system, though, is not limited by state ownership. It is poststate, pan-corporate, and boundless. The unique offering of telecommunications is that it offers its purveyors nearly instantaneous contact to nearly every location in the world. In a few years, the microwave towers we are only now coming to understand are slated to be replaced by corporate-sponsored satellite technologies. Talk about invisible and invasive. At that time, no place on this Earth will be immune from the political and economic effects of electromagnetic radiation. Corporations are pursuing this latest means of dissemination because, for efficient functioning, they require instant coordination of their global web of resource exploitation, goods and service distribution, and social control. In the United States, the platform for such operation is the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which, echoing the legal structure of the World Trade Organization, disallows local market-imposing regulations and bans based on health or environmental effects.

As a descendant of the inventor of the telephone, I am listening to these pained echoes with a sharp ear. On my journey to the café where I penned this essay, I was startled to find that the passionately disputed microwave tower along New Mexico Highway 285/84 had been erected overnight. My friend Camila Trujillo lives immediately beneath its umbrella of emissions. I am saddened.

The corporate rip-off of the telephone from Bell's hands is a rip-off that persists. Due to the stranglehold corporations have on the media, though, little is known within the United States about action against the wireless industry in other parts of the world. The news is that the movement is not in its infancy. In 2000, hundreds of scientists, researchers, doctors, technicians, elected officials, and representatives from environmental, health, and civil rights organizations met in Salzburg, Austria. Hailing from New Zealand, China, Canada, Russia, Sweden, England, and other countries, they founded an international network called the Global Electromagnetic Awareness and Safety Alliance. (The city of Salzburg, by the way, allows only emissions 100 times less potent than those permitted in the

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United States.) Meanwhile, the U.N. World Health Organization has formed the International Committee on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection. Conferences on the health effects of cell-phone transmitters have convened in Belgium, Sweden, France, Italy, and England, and there have been numerous petitions, manifestos, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience. In Spain, a judge acknowledged "the rights of citizens to a healthy environment free of fields" and ordered corporate compensation to victims of "electromagnetic trespass."

It is time to integrate the struggle into our antiglobalization work. The only way I know to reclaim our thoughts and acts, heal the schizoid fragments perpetrated by expansionist systems, and reconstitute lasting communities on this Earth is for us to listen, learn, and be visible. ♦

(For information on the global challenge to wireless technology, subscribe to *No Place to Hide*, Cellular Phone Taskforce, P.O. Box 1337, Mendocino, CA 95460; 718-434-4499; \$25/yr.)

Chellis Glendinning's books include *Off the Map* (An Expedition Deep into Empire and the Global Economy), *winner of the National Federation of Press Women 2000 Book Award*; and *My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*.

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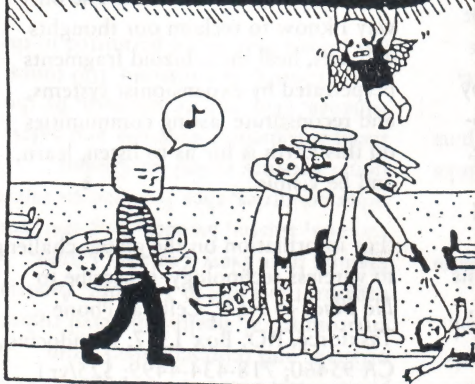


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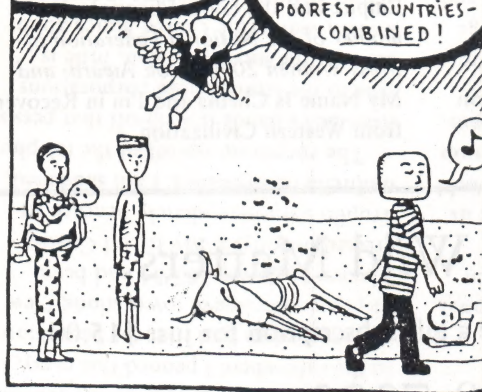
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